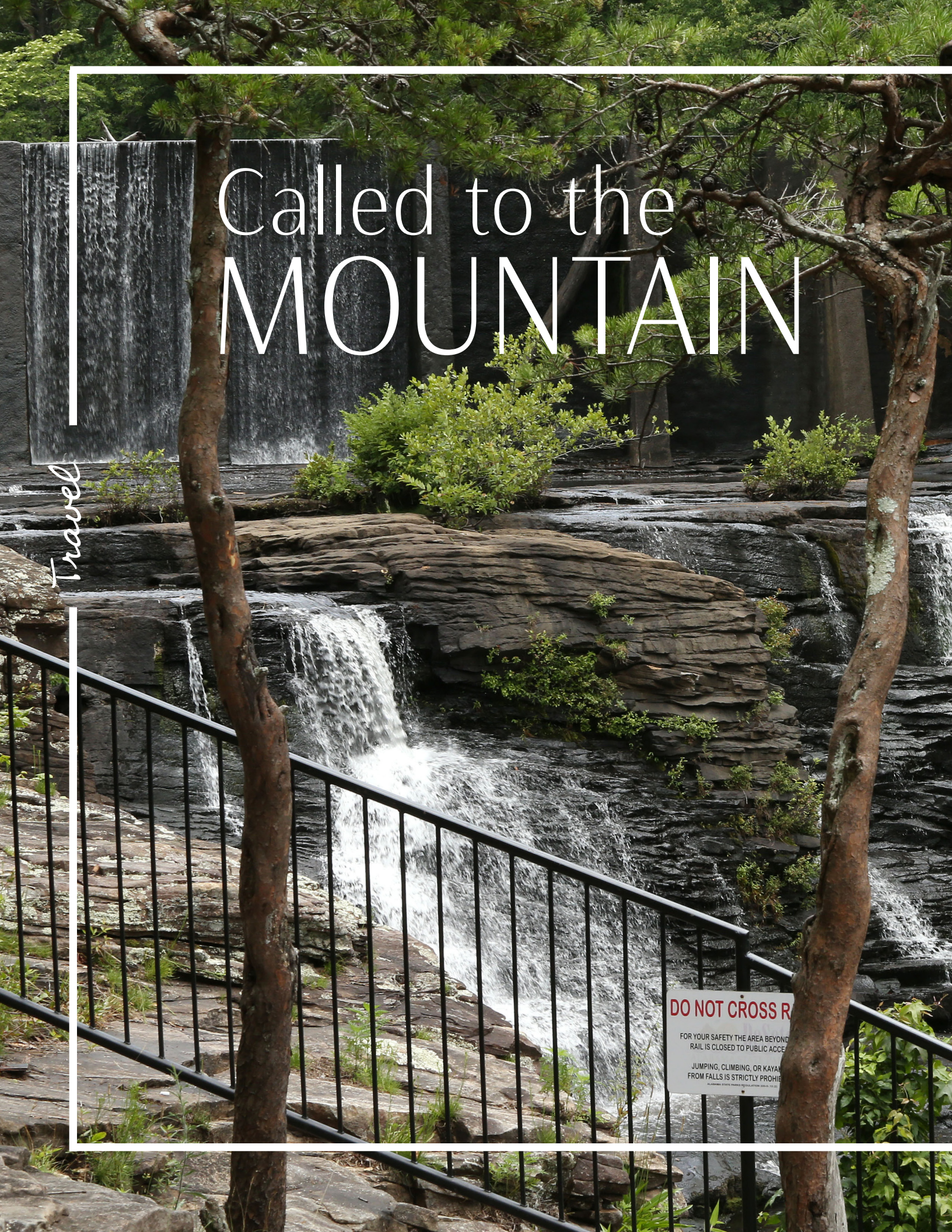
Mud&Magnolias

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Travel

Called to the MOUNTAIN





A red boat house on Desoto State Park Lake.

DISCOVERING THE MAGICAL FLOW AND WILD NATURE OF MENTONE, ALABAMA

Story by Meredith Biesinger
Photos by Adam Robison

The mist hangs in the air long before you reach the overlook.

You hear DeSoto Falls before you see it – a steady, thunderous rush echoing through the trees atop Lookout Mountain. Then suddenly, the forest opens, revealing one of Alabama's most breathtaking natural wonders: water plunging 104 feet into the rugged gorge below, sending a cool spray into the mountain air.

Even on the hottest summer afternoon, standing beside DeSoto Falls feels refreshing.

It's also the moment many visitors realize they are no longer in the everyday rush of life.

Nestled atop the west brow of Lookout Mountain in northeast Alabama, the tiny town of Mentone is only about three hours from Tupelo. In travel circles, destinations like this are often called "one-tank trips" – close enough for a spontaneous weekend away, yet far enough to feel like a true escape.

And escape is exactly what many people find here.

Mountain breezes replace traffic noise. Church bells drift through town. Wildflowers spill from cottage gardens, and front porches invite visitors to sit a little longer. Perched high above the valleys below, Mentone feels worlds away from everyday life.

According to many who call it home, Mentone isn't simply a place you visit.

It's a place that calls you.

Laura Catherine "Moon" Moon, owner of the beloved Wildflower Café, first arrived in Mentone in 1998 after her father suggested she visit if she loved "nature and beauty." The Birmingham native had spent time living in California and wasn't planning to remain in Alabama. Then she drove up Lookout Mountain.

"When I topped the mountain, it just stole my heart," Moon said. "It's a magical little spot."

Nearly three decades later, she is still there.

Moon's story is not unusual in Mentone.

Rachel and Pete Sterns, owners of Bee on the Brow Bed & Breakfast, tell a remarkably similar tale. The couple, who lived everywhere from Alaska to Huntsville during Pete's military career, assumed Alabama would merely be a temporary stop. Then friends suggested they spend a weekend in Mentone.

Neither had even heard of it.

In 2018, they rented a cabin atop Lookout Mountain. The next morning, they awoke above the clouds – a quintessential Mentone experience. While enjoying a quiet moment outside, Pete watched a mother bear and her cub casually wander past.

"He came and found me directly," Rachel recalled with a laugh. "'Rachel, I really think we need to consider Mentone.'"

By the end of that weekend, the Sterns weren't simply planning another getaway; they were imagining a life on the mountain.

Standing beside DeSoto Falls, it's easy to understand why.

No trip to Mentone would be complete without visiting one of Alabama's tallest and most photographed waterfalls. The falls are easily accessible, making them ideal for families, photographers, and anyone simply looking to pause and soak in the scenery.

Nearby, DeSoto State Park offers more than 3,500 acres of forests, streams, overlooks, waterfalls, and miles of hiking



The view from Brow Park in Mentone, Alabama







Paul Peppers, an employee at Mentone Market, and owner Kathryn Norris, talk with a customer as they wrap the photo he bought in the market.



and biking trails. Whether you prefer a leisurely stroll to a scenic vista or a day spent exploring rugged backcountry trails, there is no shortage of outdoor adventure.

Of course, waterfalls are only part of Mentone's story.

At the heart of town sits the charming Log Cabin Village, a collection of rustic cabins tucked beneath towering trees. It's impossible not to slow down here. Visitors wander from shop to shop, discovering handmade pottery, local artwork, antiques, handcrafted soaps, gourmet treats, jewelry, and one-of-a-kind treasures tucked inside weathered log structures.

Shops such as Straight Creek Studio, Sunflower Studio, Little River Soaps, Sandra's Sundries, and the Village Ice Cream Shop each offer their own distinct mountain character. It is the kind of place where browsing turns into conversation, where you walk in looking for a gift and leave with a handmade mug, a scoop of ice cream, and the story behind both.

Just down the road, Mentone Market has served as the community's general store for more than 80 years. Equal parts market, gathering place, and local institution, it is a place where visitors can browse farm-fresh produce, local meats, handmade goods, regional art, take-home meals, groceries, and gifts while experiencing the kind of genuine Southern hospitality that seems increasingly rare.

No visit to Mentone would be complete without a meal at the Wildflower Café.

Housed inside a colorful historic home shaded by towering trees, the café hums with conversation, live music, and the unmistakable feeling that everyone is welcome. Guests spill onto the porches while





Peanut Butter Pie



Loaded Shrimp and Gritts

local artwork fills the walls and musicians often provide an impromptu soundtrack to the afternoon.

Moon envisioned the restaurant as more than simply a place to eat.

She wanted to support local artists and local musicians and create a gathering place for both residents and visitors. What she created has become one of Alabama's most beloved destination restaurants.

Moon herself took an unconventional path to get there.

After moving to Mentone, she and her former husband purchased land along the Little River and built a cabin using trees harvested from their own property. For years, they lived without electricity or running water, collecting rainwater, cooking on a wood stove, and immersing themselves completely in mountain life.

Along the way, Moon opened several businesses before eventually purchasing the Wildflower Café name and transforming it into something uniquely Mentone.

"I love creating experiences," she said. "I love helping people feel good. When they come in here and walk in this space, they can just have a great experience. They get fed with food. They get fed with soulfulness."



Laura Catherine Moon, known as Moon, owner of the Wildflower Cafe in Mentone Alabama, talks with customers during the lunch rush.



That feeling lingers long after the meal is over.

The Wildflower's famous tomato pie has earned an almost legendary reputation, drawing visitors from across the Southeast. But regulars know to save room for the gluten-free peanut butter pie, hummingbird cake, spinach quiche, or one of Moon's travel-inspired specials. The menu reflects her love of Southern ingredients while incorporating flavors gathered during her travels.

More important than any menu item, however, is the atmosphere.

"So many people don't feel welcome in a lot of places," Moon said. "I feel like Wildflower is a place where people can really feel at home."

For travelers wishing to linger a little longer, Bee on the Brow offers an ideal mountain retreat.

Perched along scenic Lookout Mountain, the traditional bed and breakfast sits high above Railroad Valley, where expansive views stretch for miles and sunsets often steal the show. The inn features four thoughtfully designed guest suites, each created to maximize the mountain views and provide guests with a peaceful retreat.

Mornings begin with a two-course gourmet breakfast featuring seasonal ingredients, Southern favorites, and, appropriately, a touch of honey. Evenings are reserved for rocking chairs, mountain breezes, and stargazing from the inn's spacious deck.

The inn's name itself reflects both the landscape and the Sterns family's story.

Rachel grew up in a family of beekeepers, and bees became a meaningful symbol throughout her life.

"If you look at the honeybee, this is a creature designed with purpose," Rachel said. "The reward for their labor is honey. It's a sweet reward for working hard."

The second half of the name comes from the inn's location along





The main living space at Bee on the Brow



Pete and Rachel Sterns are the owners of Bee on the Brow in Mentone Alabama.

the mountain's "brow," a geological term for the mountain's dramatic edge.

"We want guests to be on the brow," Rachel explained. "Be connected, be still, be adventurous, whatever you need to be. Be here."

The Sterns say one of their favorite parts of innkeeping is watching guests connect – with one another, with fellow travelers, and with the mountain itself. Many arrive planning a quiet weekend and leave wondering why they didn't stay longer.

"People leave saying they should have stayed another day," Rachel said. "There's more here than you think."

She's right.

And while many visitors come for the waterfalls and mountain views, they often discover there is much more to explore. Spend an afternoon antiquing in nearby Fort Payne, browse local galleries, saddle up for a horseback ride through the mountain landscape, or simply pack a picnic and head to Brow Park to watch the sunset paint the valley below.



Creative spirits can explore local studios, shop the town's eclectic stores, or spend a leisurely morning meandering through town with coffee in hand. In Mentone, some of the best moments happen when you abandon the itinerary altogether.

Maybe that's what makes Mentone so special. It's not just the waterfalls, the food, or the views – although those are certainly reasons enough to visit. It's the feeling you carry home with you long after you've driven back down the mountain.

Sometimes the most memorable adventures aren't found across the country.

Sometimes they're waiting just one tank of gas away.



"A River Runs Through It," a mosaic glass art project at Desoto State Park, was deisgned by Brittney M. Hughes and Linda Munoz, and it was created with the help of over 1,000 community members and visitors of Mentone and Fort Payne.